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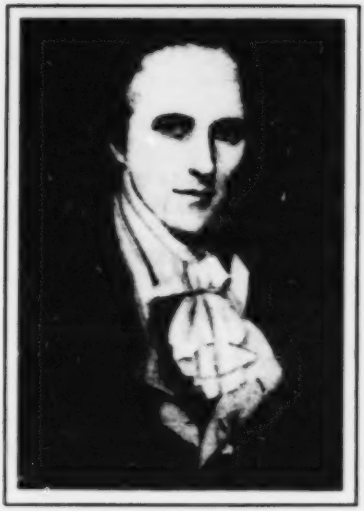
RED RIVER SETTLEMENT

A cannon blast at midday on 4 September 1812 near the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers summoned local inhabitants to witness a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) proclamation of great importance to the subsequent history of Western Canada. A group representing the culturally diverse fur trade society which had evolved in recent decades gathered at a spot opposite the mouth of the Assiniboine. The proclamation, read aloud to this audience in French and English, announced the transfer of almost 187,000 square kilometres of HBC territory to Thomas Douglas, fifth Earl of Selkirk.

Lord Selkirk planned to open the newly-ceded territory for agricultural settlement by displaced tenant farmers from Scotland and Ireland, driven from their homes by the new sheep-raising schemes of their landlords. Selkirk's own scheme arose from commercial as well as philanthropic motives. As an HBC shareholder, Selkirk wished to see the Company gain the upper hand in its fierce competition with the North West Company (NWCo) for control of the fur trade in British North America's western interior. Selkirk viewed the establishment of pioneer agricultural settlement in the region as a potential asset in the Company's struggle with the NWCo.

Unsurprisingly, the sometimes lethal rivalry between the two fur trade concerns repeatedly threatened the Selkirk colony with extinction. Natural calamities and harsh conditions further challenged its inhabitants. Although the colony was at best only modestly successful as an agricultural experiment, it provided an important focus for settlement in the Canadian West, and was the cradle of a community unique in North America.



Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

HBC shareholder Andrew Wedderburn Colville and his associates spearheaded a major reorganization of the Company in 1810-11 aimed at confounding NWCo competition in the North American wilderness. In part, Colville's strategy sought to provision remote HBC posts from within the embattled fur trade region itself. This would eliminate costly dependence upon goods imported from Britain. It also opened a way for Lord Selkirk (Colville's brother-in-law) to realize his dream of new homes within the British Empire for those uprooted by widespread enclosure and reallocation of Irish and Scottish farmlands. HBC directors awarded land to Selkirk in mid-June 1811. He then began to recruit settlers who would be granted new opportunities and homes, while improving his own overseas estate and furnishing the Company with provisions and manpower.

Understandably, the Montreal-based Nor'Westers viewed this colonization plan as the latest and most alarming volley in their often violent trade war with the HBC. Their fears were twofold. Firstly, an HBC-sponsored farm colony might reinforce their rival's claims to exclusive privileges and extensive properties in the interior, which originally were ceded to the HBC by Royal Charter in 1670. Secondly, the Nor'Westers foresaw that the location of the settlement threatened to interfere with communications and supply links vital to their operations.

Competing interests in the fur trade virtually guaranteed that the NWCo would directly challenge the authority of Governor Miles MacDonell. This Scottish-born United Empire Loyalist was entrusted by Selkirk and the HBC with the task of launching the colony.

Mischief by the NWCo helped postpone the arrival of Macdonell until 29 August 1812. He arrived at Red River with a party of labourers a full year behind schedule, and too late in the season to sow the colony's first crop as planned. Macdonell quickly recognized that his most urgent task was to secure winter provisions. Within the week, the HBC cannon sounded, and the Selkirk Colony proclamation was read to an audience of Company officers and servants, Cree and Saulteaux Indians, and Métis and *Canadien* "freemen" who worked as independent agents furnishing fur trade provisions gleaned from the buffalo hunt. Some NWCo officers also attended the ceremony. Working against time, Macdonell sent most members of his advance party to an HBC provisioning post at the mouth of the Pembina River. He hastily selected a site for the settlement—a partially burnt-over promontory which he dubbed "Point Douglas" in honour of the Earl. He set the rest of his party to work breaking sod and erecting shelters, and travelled south to Pembina.

On 27 October, he was joined there by the first contingent of settlers. As Macdonell feared, the newcomers had found little prepared for them at the recently selected colony site. Macdonell directed that Fort Daer be built to protect them from the Sioux, and engaged some freemen to provide fresh game. Winter brought intermittent food shortages despite this measure. While wintering at Pembina, the settlers were demoralized further by dreary chores and apparent neglect by Macdonell, who spent much time in the company of NWCo officers in a vain attempt to secure good will toward the settlers. When he learned that some Nor'Westers were trying to dissuade the freemen from selling buffalo meat to the needy colonists, Macdonell ordered an end to all social and commercial interaction with NWCo personnel in mid-April 1813.

Map showing the land granted Lord Selkirk in 1811 and the route of settlers from Hudson Bay to Red River and Pembina.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

This was hardly a promising prelude to actual settlement. Nonetheless, the colonists succeeded that summer in growing some potatoes and turnips on the forty hectare river lots laid out for them north of Point Douglas. Some roads were cleared, and construction projects, including several buildings later incorporated in the Fort Douglas complex, began to take shape. Most settlers again wintered at Pembina during 1813-14, while awaiting the arrival of a second contingent: about fifty Kildonan Scots who were sequestered until spring at Fort Churchill.

For Governor Macdonell, the arrival of the Kildonan Scots in June 1814 marked the true launching of the Red River Settlement. Each family was assigned a forty hectare lot. These were much longer and narrower than the lots taken up by the first contingent, in order to promote a more concentrated pattern of settlement. Macdonell viewed the Kildonan Scots as much keener farmers than those in the original group of colonists. The population was also increased by *Canadien* freemen who chose to settle with their Indian and Métis families near the forks and at White Horse Plain, rather than return to Canada at the close of their fur trade careers. Despite these generally encouraging developments, the settlement was dogged by suspicion and strife fomented by the Nor'Westers. Population increase raised the spectre of food shortages. The vital issue of food supplies soon enflamed hostilities and rival interests, and open conflict resulted.

View of Point Douglas by Peter Rindisbacher, c. 1825.
Courtesy Hudson's Bay Company Archives

Tensions had increased the previous winter when Macdonell, anticipating the arrival of the Kildonan Scots, banned the export of pemmican from Assiniboia. His edict, issued on 8 January 1814, succeeded in securing sufficient food for the settlers. However, the pemmican embargo resulted in a round of seizures and counter-seizures which lent credence to the Nor'Westers' view of the Selkirk colony project as a gambit by the HBC to menace NWCo operations. Macdonell's next measure to guarantee food supplies during the winter of 1814-15 prohibited the "running" of buffalo herds on the grounds that this practice drove the animals beyond reach of the settlers, who were not equipped with horses. Both of Macdonell's edicts alarmed the freemen, who perceived a threat to their established role as buffalo hunters and suppliers of pemmican to the fur trade. This perception was encouraged and exploited by the NWCo.

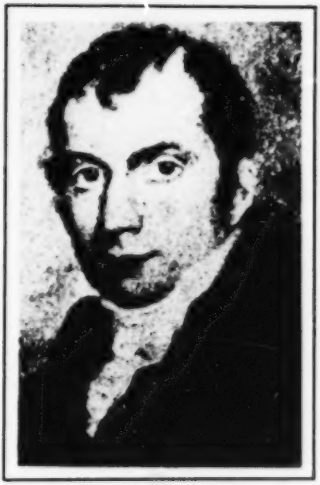
In harrying the colony project, the Nor'Westers resorted to several measures in addition to manipulating the fears of the freemen. One tactic involved legalistic skullduggery. Several Nor'Westers who were justices of the peace used their authority to transport Assiniboia residents to lower Canada for prosecution under fancifully interpreted provisions of the British *Canada Jurisdiction Act* of 1803. On a different front, NWCo agents encouraged the freemen and Métis to harass colonists in the fields, and then stepped forward themselves at an opportune moment with tempting offers of free passage to Canada.

In retaliation, Governor Macdonell declared that all NWCo Assiniboia posts were in trespass. Although he had merely wished to declare Selkirk's rights and not to evict the NWCo, the Nor'Westers responded by arresting Macdonell after having attacked Fort Douglas in June 1815. His sheriff had been arrested earlier. The settlers virtually were helpless after their protector had been transported to Canada by the NWCo. Many frustrated pioneers accepted the offers of free passage from the strife-torn colony; others complied with the NWCo order to "quit the river, the Company as well as the Colony" by sailing to the north end of Lake Winnipeg. NWCo servants and some Métis then trampled the abandoned crops, looted and burned the settlers' homes.

The sorely tried colonists were joined at their refuge a few weeks later by HBC brigade leader Colin Robertson, a colourful former Nor'Wester who shared the task of resurrecting the Red River Settlement. Robertson led them back to the ravaged farms, where they harvested what was left of their crops and prepared pemmican for the winter. This was a timely initiative, because a third contingent of settlers—eighty people led by the newly appointed governor, Robert Semple—arrived in Assiniboia by early November.

Equally important, Robertson's tact in dealing with the Métis and freemen persuaded them for a brief while to adopt a policy of peaceful coexistence with the settlers. With respect to the Nor'Westers who had exploited the fears of freemen, Robertson's motto was "When among wolves, howl!" It is a moot point as to who did more howling during Robertson's year at the settlement: he twice captured NWCo Fort Gibraltar and restrained for a time the worst excesses of the settlement's foes. But, as the relatively peaceful winter subsided, the Nor'Wester campaign against the colony showed signs of renewed life. Robertson tried to persuade Governor Semple to strike first rather than await the anticipated attack on the settlement. However, Robertson's successes loomed too large in the eyes of the new Governor: Semple remained complacent. He was content with destroying the NWCo fort, whereupon he retired to Fort Douglas. Disappointed in the new governor, Robertson left the colony on 11 June 1816.

Within ten days of his departure, bloodshed marred the annals of the Red River Settlement, and its inhabitants were dispersed once again, fleeing in terror to the mouth of the Jack River at the north end of Lake Winnipeg. This second dispersal occurred in



Governor Robert Semple.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

the wake of the one-sided skirmish at Seven Oaks* on 19 June 1816, in which Semple and twenty-one other men were killed. The governor unwisely marched from his fort at the head of a small, ill-equipped band to confront a larger group of Métis horsemen led by the NWCo's influential protégé, Cuthbert Grant. Accounts of the skirmish differ as to whether Grant planned to attack Fort Douglas (which was alleged later by friends of the colony), or simply wished to bypass the river forks blockade with a supply of precious pemmican (the NWCo version of events).

It is impossible to know whether these developments could have been prevented had Robertson remained at the settlement. Some historians believe that the arrogance of Semple and his associates toward the Métis squandered the modest fund of good will toward the settlement which Robertson's diplomacy had secured. In turn, justifiably offended and suspicious Métis increasingly turned to the leadership of Grant, whose NWCo benefactors of course had no love for the colony. Perhaps one of the most revealing comments about the situation at Red River lies in the fact that permanent occupation of the colony site resulted not from the conciliatory skills of a man like Robertson, but from the presence of mercenary soldiers.

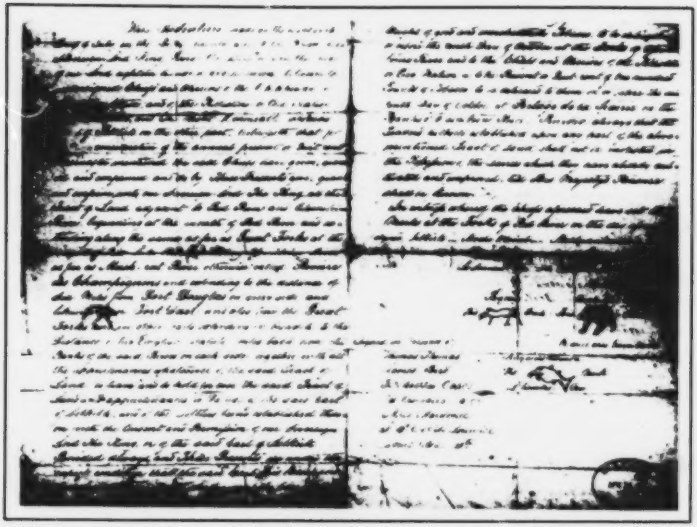
*The exact site of the skirmish is unknown, but is commemorated by a monument erected at Main Street and Rupertsland Avenue in present-day West Kildonan.

Stabilization: Mercenaries and a Merger, 1816-21

Even while much-abused colonists took stock of their bleak situation at Lake Winnipeg, Lord Selkirk himself was on his way westward with a group of soldiers hired to restore order in the interior.

Selkirk had assembled his force of about 100 men from the de Meurons regiment and other military units which were being disbanded or pared down following the War of 1812. Miles Macdonell met Selkirk's column at Sault Ste. Marie, notifying the Earl of the killings at Seven Oaks and the second dispersal of colonists from their homes. This news convinced Selkirk to confront the Nor'Westers directly by advancing on their Fort William depot, rather than proceeding to the settlement by way of the Red River headwaters. Selkirk's mercenaries seized the NWCo fort, capturing several of its officers who were sent as prisoners to Montreal. Wintering at Fort William, Selkirk dispatched a unit commanded by Macdonell and Captain Proteus d'Orsennens of the de Meurons. The unit overpowered the NWCo Rainy Lake post before capturing Fort Daer, and then Fort Douglas itself on 10 January 1817.

Selkirk thus achieved his objective: the settlement was secure, at least militarily. By August 1817, the settlers returned to their ruined fields and met their benefactor. Selkirk remained in the settlement only until 4 September. Although his visit was a brief one, it witnessed several events which did much to promote the future economic and physical wellbeing of his colonists. Selkirk dispensed free lots to his mercenaries, whose apparent deficiency as farmers was more than compensated for by their presence in the colony which promised to deter further aggression against it. Sites were selected for a church and school, bridges and thoroughfares; each settler was provided with a wooded fuel lot. During Selkirk's visit, he negotiated a treaty with the district's Indians (who had remained neutral throughout the recent hostilities) to compensate them for lands occupied by the colony.



Indenture between Lord Selkirk and the chiefs of the Saulteaux and Cree nations, signed on 18 July 1817.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The Earl's visit was followed by a period of relative calm in human affairs at Red River. However, nonhuman forces—including crop failures and floods—ensured that the colony was at best but a modest success as an agricultural venture. Indeed, Selkirk's aim of establishing a sound basis for agrarian activity in British North America was to be realized only near the end of the century, upon the adoption of techniques and wheat strains appropriate to the West's soil and climate and the creation of an efficient transportation network. Fortunately for Selkirk, his settlers could not know that the first sixty years of the colony would see at least thirty partial or complete annual crop failures. Given such formidable odds, even moderate success reflects the dogged perseverance—and perhaps the simple desperation—of the colonists and their descendants.

On 10 September 1817, within days of Selkirk's departure from the settlement, frost struck hard at what had promised to be a rich harvest along the banks of the Red River. It was followed within the week by a severe storm. Once again, the settlers were forced to rely upon the buffalo in order to survive the winter. A meagre 700 bushels in total of wheat, barley, and potatoes were salvaged to sow the 1818 crop. Colonists closely tended the fragile, fresh green shoots bursting from the rich, dark soil. So did hordes of grasshoppers. So severe was the devastation caused by the locusts that when a forty member contingent of French Canadians recruited by Selkirk arrived at the colony in July 1818, the newcomers paused barely long enough to blink and shake their heads. They then hurried southward to settle among compatriots and Métis inhabitants near Pembina.

The introduction of domestic animal husbandry in the colony was a similarly unspectacular matter. From the settlement's inception, there was an ongoing struggle to replenish livestock herds that annually fell prey to dogs, wolves, and winter. Poultry were imported by way of York Factory. So were sheep and cattle, albeit with dismal results. Most cattle at Red River were driven there from as far away as Kentucky and St. Louis; the first large herd was brought north only in 1821 by a *Canadien* resident of Prairie du Chien in Wisconsin.

However, the year 1821 was distinguished by several red-letter days. That year witnessed the corporate merger of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. This historic merger eliminated the colonists' need for the sort of defensive effort mounted four years earlier by Lord Selkirk, who had died in 1820. Nevertheless, the Earl's influence continued to be felt when yet another contingent arrived at his colony. This contingent—165 German-speaking Swiss recruited by Selkirk's European agent, von May—arrived in 1821. Among them were a number of young single women who were soon wedded to de Meurons mercenaries. The soldier-settlers also opened their homes to their new in-laws.

But the rest of the Swiss newcomers spent their first North American winter in misery at Pembina. Most were urban artisans who had been led to expect that Red River offered an eager market for their skills, as well as an Edenlike environment in which groves of bananas and other tropical fruits flourished. They were sadly mistaken. The Swiss also suffered because of efforts by the buffalo hunters to maintain prices for plains provisions, which were forced downward during the adjustment period following the fur trade merger.

The Post-Merger Period, 1821-36

Reorganization of fur trade activities by the reconstituted HBC was accompanied by efforts to direct the affairs of the Red River Settlement through an increasingly businesslike and orderly civil administration. At the time of the fur trade merger, Acting Governor Alexander Macdonell's regime was widely associated with corruption, nepotism, maladministration, and drunkenness. His sobriquet, "the Grasshopper Governor", suggests the sort of regard in which he was held by colonists. However, such men as Andrew Bulger and George Simpson succeeded him as administrator, and wrought numerous changes which improved life for the colonists during the 1820s.

Bulger's brief administration rehabilitated the governorship, called into contempt by Alexander Macdonell's conduct. Bulger dealt fairly and even-handedly with the various interest groups within the settlement, and established the primacy of the governor's authority over that of the local HBC factor in all matters affecting Assiniboia. More importantly, Bulger's efforts won settlers the right to trade for provisions without being liable to sanctions by the Company. Unfortunately, Bulger's efforts also won him the enmity of Simpson—the powerful governor of the HBC Northern Department. Simpson summarily accepted Bulger's resignation, which had been tendered only during a play for power.

In autumn 1823, Simpson effectively took the helm of colony affairs. Simpson adjudicated matters ranging from the terms under which colonists occupied their land to the manner in which they paid for provisions. Simpson introduced a system of awarding thousand year leases to settlers in exchange for their compliance with certain conditions, including annual contributions to offset ecclesiastical, civil, and military expenses. Leaseholders further agreed to refrain from trading in furs and the production of alcohol. Simpson introduced hard currency into the colony, laying the basis for a cash economy. He closed the colony store, which had been a source of dissension, and replaced it with an HBC outlet that offered settlers the same discount as that given to Company employees.

Governor George Simpson.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Governor Simpson also established the system of swearing-in special constables to police the settlement, and formalized the sittings of the Council of Assiniboia in order that public business might be dealt with on a regular and consistent basis. Simpson was instrumental in relocating *Canadiens* and Métis from the Pembina district to the new communities at St. Boniface and White Horse Plain. By 1825, the Red River was said to be occupied from Netley Creek to the La Salle River (originally known as *la rivière Sale*).

Despite the plans of its founders, the settlement never became a source of export commodities, although fitful, ill-starred ventures were launched involving buffalo wool, tallow, and experimental farming.

The Selkirk Colony experienced a major setback in the spring of 1826. After a long, hard winter in which some families had gone hungry, flooding swamped the settlement, destroying virtually every structure that had been built there. About 300 Swiss, de Meurons, and Canadian settlers abandoned the colony with Simpson's blessing and assistance.

Those who remained rebuilt and strengthened the colony's institutions and homes. The fledgling missions, Catholic and Protestant, grew sufficiently large to establish parish life as a reality in the settlement. The various elements of Red River society settled into annual routines, and Upper and Lower Fort Garry were built—symbols of the wealth and security of the HBC, whose role in the colony increased and ultimately eclipsed that of the Selkirk interests.

By 1835, only a small proportion among the colonists could properly be called *Selkirk* settlers. The balance of the colony's population consisted of Métis and Rupertslanders (English-speaking Métis) native to the country, or ex-traders and labourers employed in the fur trade. Ultimately, by a "reconveyance" dated 4 May 1836, the Selkirk interests retroceded their rights in Assiniboia to the HBC. From that point, Red River became the sole responsibility of the Company—a development which appears to have been in the offing at least from the advent of Simpson's regime during the previous decade.

Under Company rule the colony grew, albeit not without intermittent frictions as to the limits appropriate to HBC authority in civil matters. This question was resolved decisively only with Manitoba's creation as a Canadian province in 1870.

The Red River Settlement evolved in a manner far different from that envisioned by its idealistic founder, the fifth Earl of Selkirk. It never became a refuge for legions of displaced Highland Scots and Irish, nor was it an especially lucrative investment. Rather, the Selkirk "experiment" produced a community in which hundreds of displaced fur trade labourers and others would coalesce. The colonists, the Métis and Rupertslanders, and the European or Canadian traders produced a frontier community which was unique in North American history.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Red River Settlement is perhaps one of the best documented frontier communities in North America. Census and parish records, journals, private papers, and thousands of pieces of correspondence can be found in the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Although somewhat ethnocentric in outlook, Alexander Ross' *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress and Present State* (Minneapolis, Ross & Haines, 1957) is still useful for its contemporary observations. Although there are many excellent studies of specific aspects of Red River, the best synthesis is found in the relevant portions of A.S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (2nd edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973). W.L. Morton's *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969) and Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies, A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984) are also useful guides to the development of the settlement. Helpful biographies are John Morgan Gray's *Lord Selkirk of Red River* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964); M.A. Macleod and W.L. Morton's *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1963); and J.S. Galbraith's *The Little Emperor: Governor Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976). Historic Resources Branch pamphlets dealing with the early stages of the settlement are "Peter Fidler", "Cuthbert Grant", "Chief Peguis", "Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk" and "St. Boniface".

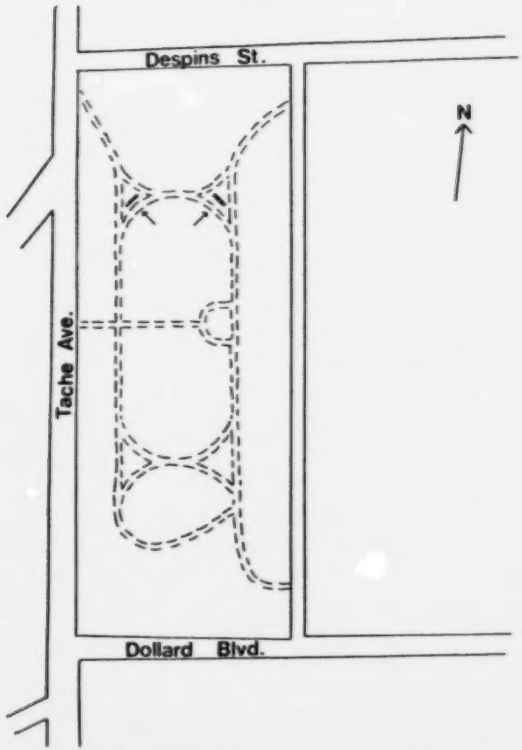
Credits

The cover illustration showing W. Frank Lynn's painting "The Forks" is printed courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

RED RIVER SETTLEMENT

Near this site the Red River Settlement was formally proclaimed. On September 4, 1812, with a guard of honour under arms, Miles Macdonell took possession of Assiniboia, the lands granted by the Hudson's Bay Company to the Earl of Selkirk. Macdonell, the first governor, was attended by officers and servants of the North West Company from Fort Gibraltar which lay across the Red River. The Patent and Macdonell's commission were read in French and English.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba



Two plaques (English and French) are located in La Vérendrye Park on Taché Avenue in Winnipeg.